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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY D, 104TH INFANTRY,
(26TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE ATTACK FROM
BETTORN TO BUSCHRODT, LUXEMBOURG,
22 - 24 DECEMBER 1944.

(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Experience of a Heavy Weapons Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY HEAVY WEAPONS
COMPANY IN A MEETING ENGAGEMENT

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company D, 104th Infantry, 26th Infantry Division, in the attack from BETTBORN to BUSCHRODT, LUXEMBOURG, 22 to 24 December, 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge.

For orientation let us briefly look at the general situation as of 15 December, one week before this small action took place. The Allied Armies in ITALY were being held to a virtual stalemate at the Gothic Line. In the rest of EUROPE the Allied Armies were disposed from the North Sea to the Swiss border. (See Map A) The British Second Army and the Canadian First Army had reached the banks of the MAAS RIVER and the outskirts of VENLO. (1) The U. S. Ninth and First Armies were pressing against the SIEGFRIED LINE defenses with the First Army on the west bank of the ROER RIVER opposite DUREN. (2) In the south, the U. S. Third and Seventh Armies had practically cleared the enemy from the province of ALSACE LORRAINE, assisted by the French First Army. (3) There were simply not enough men to hold the entire line at full strength and a calculated risk was taken. (4) This risk involved leaving the ARDENNES sector of the line lightly held in order to concentrate the necessary forces in other sectors where the Allies expected to

(1) A-2, p. 79
(2) A-2, p. 79
(3) A-2, p. 80
(4) A-1, p. 242

continue the offensive. (5)

The Third U.S. Army had just completed the capture of METZ and was preparing for their next offensive which was to be an all out effort to break through the SIEGFRIED LINE. (6) The events that transpired on the 16th of December caused a slight delay in these plans.

On the morning of 16 December, with the weather cold and cloudy, a strong German force, directed by Field Marshall Von Rundstedt, struck at the most lightly held portion of the Allied Line. Their goal was to capture LEIGE and ANTWERP, the latter being our largest port, to separate the Allied Armies in the north and south, and they even had hopes of defeating one of our Armies or at least gaining time for the defense of their homeland. (7) To begin with they were successful and by the 20th of December they had pushed a dangerous salient in our lines. (See Map A)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower, decided not to try to meet the attack head on but to canalize it with strong walls on both sides and let it run it's course through the barren ARDENNES country. (8) The U.S. First and Ninth Armies with the British Second Army were to form this wall on the north and the U. S. Third Army would form the southern wall. At a conference at VERDUN, FRANCE on 19 December, General Patton promised General Eisenhower that he would have III Corps, consisting of the 26th and 80th Infantry Divisions and the 4th Armored Division attacking the southern flank of the

(5) A-1, p. 244
(6) A-4, p. 136
(7) A-4, p. 144
(8) A-1, p. 245

German penetration by 22 December. (9)

The 26th Infantry Division which was to help form this southern wall was at METZ at this time. The division had just been relieved from the front lines for some badly needed rest. For the past 6 days it had been busy rebuilding and reorganizing after dropping down to less than 50 percent combat strength. Approximately 3000 replacements had been given to the Division after it reached METZ and an effort was being made to intergrate these into the fighting team when the call came to get back to work.

The general plan was for the 26th Division to move north with the 4th Armored Division on their left making the same advance and the 80th Infantry Division making the same effort on their right. The 26th Division itself planned to attack with two Infantry Regiments, the 104th and the 328th, abreast with the 101st in reserve. (10)

The enemy situation was very vague. Unit commanders were told that an enemy penetration had been made but the exact area could not be shown as the situation was too fluid and uncertain. One item that was believed to be true and was to be proven true by events was that these enemy troops were well trained, well equipped and that their morale was very high.

On the other hand the 104th Infantry was in the midst of reorganization and training and it is certainly safe to say that their morale recieved a severe blow when this German counter offensive rudely interrupted what they thought would be a month of reserve duty. Their supplies were generally in good shape as new equipment had been procured in METZ to make

(9) A-5, p. 191

(10) A-6, p. 22

up most of their combat losses. Early in the morning of 20 December the 104th entrucked and moved north from METZ to LUXEMBOURG where they occupied an assembly area in the vicinity of HOBSHIED, LUXEMBOURG before beginning their role as a part of the southern wall against the enemy penetration. (11) (See Map B)

DISPOSITION AND PLANS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 104TH INFANTRY

The 21st of December was spent by the 1st Battalion of the 104th Infantry in a defensive holding position. (See Map B) Bridges were prepared for demolition, roads mined and all approaches to the area guarded. The general plan was for the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 104th Infantry to attack along parallel routes by simply walking north until they met the enemy, with the 3rd Battalion initially following in reserve. The mission of the 1st Battalion was to march north by foot until they met the enemy, cut his lines of communication and destroy him. (12) There was no definite information of the enemy, either as to his strength or location. The line of departure would be an east west line running through REICHLANGE and 'H' hour 220600 December 1944.

D COMPANY

D Company of the 104th Infantry spent the 21st of December guarding important roads and bridges in the 1st Battalion area and checking equipment and weapons. At the same time efforts were continued to complete the reorganization of the company which had started a week ago at METZ. In addition to approxi-

(11) A-3

(12) A-3

mately 80 replacements the company had a new commanding officer and a total of only 4 of it's authorized officers.

There was still no definite knowledge of the enemy and snow fell throughout most of the day. All that was known of the terrain to their front was that it was hilly and rugged with numerous deep ravines.

The night passed quiet and cold and final preparations were made for the next morning's jump-off. The 1st Battalion was to follow the 2nd Battalion until they reached the village of BETTBORN and there the 1st Battalion column would branch off to the left and then parallel the route of the 2nd Battalion northward.

The 1st Battalion formation would be a column of companies with A Company leading and B, D, Hqs, and C following in that order. A small advance guard of one rifle squad from A Company and one Machine gun squad from D Company motorized would precede the main body by about 500 yards and B Company would send out flank guards to either flank. A brief order consisting of the mission of supporting the advance of the Battalion, the line of departure, 'H' hour and the formation was given by the D Company commander to his platoon leaders. They, in turn, passed the necessary information on their section and squad leaders and final preparations were made for the next morning.

NARRATION

The 2nd Battalion of the 104th Infantry crossed the line of departure at exactly 0600 hours 22 December and the 1st Battalion followed them only a few minutes later. The planned

formation was followed with the men marching in two columns, one on each side of the road, with a 10 yard interval between men. The first few hours were uneventful as far as contact with the enemy was concerned but the weather turned a little colder and by mid-morning it was snowing again, which didn't add any to the comfort of the troops as the long awaited special winter clothing still hadn't arrived.

Just before the head of the 1st Battalion column reached BETTBORN, Army trucks pulled up along the side of the troops and gas masks were issued. No reasons were given for this rather unusual supply move and most of the masks ended up by the side of the road, where the American soldier is liable to leave any piece of equipment that he thinks he can do without. Two or three days later the information was handed down that this was to be another means of identification between friendly troops but this reached most of the Battalion too late, especially since the masks were frozen and apparently useless anyway.

As ordered, at the village of BETTBORN the 1st Battalion column turned off the main road towards the northwest on a small unimproved road leading in the general direction of MONS HORRAS Farm. (See Map C) Progress was very slow due to the heavy snow and shortly after the turnoff was made the Battalion Commander called in the advance guard and had them exchange their heavy machine gun for a light so that they could proceed on foot. By 1100 hours the advance guard of the battalion had reached MONS HORRAS Farm and there they halted and sent a messenger back to the Battalion Command group for further instruc-

tions, as a dense forest with no visible trails was immediately to their front.

The Battalion Commander, the Battalion S-3, the three rifle company commanders and the heavy weapons commander went forward to decide which route or routes to use around or through this obstacle. Upon reaching MONS HERRAS Farm, where the advance guard had halted it was found that the trail shown on the map which the Battalion had intended to use was completely overgrown with fir trees. A brief examination of the dense forest to their front further brought out that the trees in the entire forest grew so close together and with such low branches that any passage through would be accomplished mainly by crawling. The rifle companies could get through but it looked almost impossible for the heavy weapons company to accompany them. An alternate route to the left was considered but this would leave such a gap between the two leading battalions that it was discarded. A brief map study was made by the group and after discussion the plan decided on was as follows. A, B, and C Companies, the Battalion Commander and his forward Command post group would attempt to proceed north and northeast through the forest in order to march upon BUSCHRODT, the next village along the axis of advance. D Company would take the road south east into the village of PRATZ, clear the town if it had not already been cleared and march on to BUSCHRODT by means of a secondary road that, on the map, appeared to run directly from PRATZ to BUSCHRODT. Upon arriving at BUSCHRODT, D Company would rejoin the rest of the Battalion and the advance would be continued. The Battalion Command Post and aid station for the present would be in BETTBORN. By the time this

plan was completed the head of the main body had arrived at MONS HERRAS Farm and the rifle companies and the command group soon disappeared into the dense forest leaving D Company alone.

The D Company Commander considered what he knew of the situation, his mission and mainly what he didn't know about the enemy and decided to take three 1/4 ton trucks, mount machine guns on them and make an armed reconnaissance before moving his company any further. After he had informed his platoon leaders of this plan he instructed them to hold the balance of the company at MONS HERRAS Farm in a temporary assembly area with all around security until he sent further orders.

The company commander with his reconnaissance party got off to a good start and reached the village of PRATZ without incident. Here they made an effort to question the villagers by using one of the group who spoke passable German but this effort produced very poor results. One native excitedly led the group to a garden back of his house but instead of the enemy a dud was found. One answer, that only a few minutes later was to prove very misleading, was given when the person questioned stated that he was sure there were no Germans anywhere in that area. After they were certain that the village itself was clear, the reconnaissance party moved to the edge of the village and there contacted the 2d Battalion who were moving north of the main highway. E Company, which was the unit contacted, stated that there had been no action so far but they had gotten a report that there were some enemy troops in GROBOUS, which was their next objective.

After obtaining this information, D Company Commander de-

ecided to reconnoitre the small road shown on the map to ascertain if it could be used by D Company to join the Battalion at BUSCHRODT as planned. The reconnaissance party of three jeeps accordingly moved out of PRATZ on this small road with an interval of about 30 yards between vehicles. About 1200 yards had been traveled and the company commander in the lead vehicle had just stopped to look over a small rise when "the roof fell in". For some unknown reason all three vehicles had closed up and just at this moment machine gun fire from the east raked all the vehicles, killing one and wounding another. The guns firing sounded exactly like the familiar Browning 30 caliber water cooled and here the D Company Commander made another mistake, which almost turned out to be his last. Thinking that the fire must be from the 2d Battalion, he walked a little way towards the area where the fire had seemed to come from and called, "We are Americans too, stop firing." (13) The only answer was another vicious burst of fire so he concluded that his estimate of the situation was not quite correct and joined the rest of the group hastily, in a small ditch by the side of the road which was the only thing that even looked like cover in the area. At first an effort was made to get the mounted machine guns off the vehicles and into the road so that the fire could be returned but this failed and was given up after three more of the party had been wounded in the attempt. This failure was caused largely by the fact that the machine guns had been mounted on the anti-aircraft mounts and to remove them meant exposing the entire body. Next it was thought that the lead vehicle could be pushed over the small rise that it had

(13) Personal knowledge

halted on and a getaway made to the front. This was stopped by a round fired from the front from what was evidently a small enemy anti-tank gun.

By this time it seemed fairly certain that the enemy were located in woods to the north and east of the exposed position where the reconnaissance party were and other firing to the east seemed to indicate that the 2nd Battalion of the 104th Infantry was engaged in a fire fight with this same enemy force. There was no chance to withdraw to the west as the ground rose so steeply in that direction as to completely expose anyone attempting a movement in that direction. The next logical step seemed to be to get on the radio and ask for help. Then the sad discovery was made that, in the haste of organizing this reconnaissance party, both the radio and the operator had been left behind. One of the party volunteered to try to crawl back towards PRATZ to try to get help. He had gotten less than 100 yards before being discovered by the enemy and wounded so his effort was in vain. The slightest move in the shallow ditch brought an answering hail of fire so the group kept low and still and wished for darkness.

Night finally came but not as much darkness as was hoped for due to a very bright moon whose beams reflected against the white snow almost like day. When it seemed that it was as dark as it was going to get, a few cautious moves were made to see if it was possible to withdraw. After experimentation it developed that the best chance for the group was to withdraw to the west although this meant crawling for about 500 yards. Two of the wounded could not be moved and after these were covered

with blankets, the rest of the group started their long crawl through the snow towards the woods to the west. The group moved very slowly and quietly with lots of interval between men as the company commander had told them that if they were discovered and fired upon each man was to run for the woods. No shots followed them and after what seemed like years but was actually only about an hours hard crawl, all of the group were able to reach the edge and comparative safety of the forest.

At this point, the company commander decided to try to go back through the woods to MONS HERRAS Farm where he expected to find the rest of D Company still waiting for him. This was accomplished without serious trouble although a large German patrol had to be evaded enroute. This they did by the simple expedient of laying quietly in the snow while the enemy patrol passed through and around them, for by this time the entire group were so covered with snow as to look like part of the snow covered ground. When MONS HERRAS Farm was reached shortly before daylight it was found that the balance of D Company had moved the night before into the village of PRATZ leaving only a small security force behind at MONS HERRAS Farm in case the reconnaissance party should return there. After a short breathing spell during which a cigarette and a deep breath were enjoyed the two groups proceeded by foot back into PRATZ.

The 1st Battalion command post had also moved into PRATZ and the D Company Commander reported in there to learn what the situation was at present. Communication with the Battalion Commander and the three rifle companies with him had been lost

the afternoon before and their exact location was unknown although they were believed to be in the vicinity of BUSCHRODT. It was also learned that part of the 2nd Battalion had been held up by this same enemy force but that Company G had bypassed this enemy pocket and captured GORSBOUS in a daring night attack. (14)

The Executive Officer of the 1st Battalion instructed the D Company Commander to move his company around to the east through the 2nd Battalion area and attempt to contact the rest of the 1st Battalion in the vicinity of BUSCHRODT. One machine gun section of D Company was to be left behind to cover the western flank of the enemy pocket and to try to evacuate the wounded men of D Company that had been left behind the night before. The 2nd Battalion was contacted and through their help a suitable route selected to accomplish this new mission. (See Map C) Just before the company moved out, contact was regained with the Battalion Commander by radio. The troops with him had taken BUSCHRODT after a small fight and he wished D Company to proceed there as rapidly as possible. Upon arriving at BUSCHRODT, D Company was to hold the town and keep contact with elements of the 2nd Battalion on the right.

D Company, minus one machine gun section moved by motor from PRATZ to BUSCHRODT through the 2nd Battalion area. A small advance party of two machine gun jeeps with guns mounted, and not on the anti-aircraft mounts, preceded the rest of the company and this move was made without incident.

As soon as they arrived they proceeded to carry out their assigned mission and by dark on the 23rd December had organiz-

(14) A-2, p. 88

ed defensive positions around the town of BUSCHRODT and tied in with the 2nd Battalion. (See Map C) This contact with the 2nd Battalion consisted of four machine gun points supplemented by visiting patrols that extended from BUSCHRODT east along highway 4 to it's intersection with highway 3. The town was secured by 4 outposts manned by one squad each and two squads were held in the center of town as a mobile reserve.

The first half of the night passed quietly but shortly after midnight a large enemy group attempted to withdraw to the north through the contact line that had been set up by D Company. After a brief fire fight the enemy surrendered and it was learned that they were the remaining elements of a German heavy weapons company, part of the same group that had ambushed the D Company reconnaissance party two days before. An examination after daylight of their weapons also brought out why their fire sounded like American machine guns for that's what they were using. The final count read 6 dead and 31 captured of the enemy and no losses for D Company.

In summing up the results of this operation, we find first that D Company failed in their primary mission of giving direct and continuous fire support to the 1st Battalion. They did succeed in accomplishing their next assigned mission of securing BUSCHRODT and rendered valuable assistance in the elimination of a dangerous enemy pocket. D Company's losses for the entire operation were one killed and five wounded while the enemy losses were over five times this number.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. PLANNING

Regardless of the fact that this was to be a meeting engagement, more prior planning should have taken place. Especially when we considered that this was the first operation for the company under a new commander and with almost half of the company made up of untried replacements, a standing operating procedure should have been set up and used. There was even a small amount of time that could have been devoted to the actions and orders that would most likely apply in this type of operation.

2. THE MISSION

The initial mission assigned to D Company, that of furnishing fire support to the advance guard and general support to the main body was sound and could have been carried out. The next mission that was assigned, to clear the village of PRATZ and proceed alone to BUSCHRODT, seemed to be and was later proven to be not quite the proper mission for a heavy weapons company. If one rifle platoon had been attached to them for this mission and it used properly it is certain that the mission would have had a much better chance of success.

3. COMMUNICATION

More consideration should have been given to the difficulty that should have been expected in attempting to maintain contact in this type of terrain by radio alone. Despite the thickness of the forest a wire line could and should have been laid along

the route of advance of the battalion. The D Company Commander committed an almost unforgiveable sin when he neglected to check to be sure he had a radio and operator before he proceeded on his reconnaissance. Since the enemy action would not allow him to use a messenger, this neglect on his part left him and his party without any means of communication.

4. LATERAL CONTACT

It is very important to keep contact with the units on your flank in any type of operation and especially in a meeting engagement since you may have no definite knowledge of where you will meet the enemy.

In this operation it would have been fairly easy for the 1st Battalion to maintain contact with the 2nd Battalion on their left as the two Battalions were following parallel routes and were not widely separated. This failure to maintain contact was largely responsible for allowing the enemy pocket to cause so much trouble.

5. ENEMY POSITIONS

The enemy positions located, as they were, on the forward slope were well chosen and took full advantage of the terrain to secure good fields of fire and cover. From their positions they could and did cover both the main highway and the secondary road leading to the north and these were the two natural avenues of approach into their position.

6. INITIATIVE

When the D Company Commander left with his reconnaissance

party he gave orders that the remainder of the company should remain at MONS HERRAS Farm until he sent for them. However, after several hours had passed with no word, it is only reasonable to believe that the platoon leaders should have made some effort to locate the missing reconnaissance party.

7. INFORMATION

The gas masks that were issued to the troops as they advanced on the first day had a definite purpose of helping in identification. Most of this effort was wasted because someone either forgot or didn't think it was necessary to tell why this was done.

LESSONS

1. All operations should be carefully planned and special type operations require even more prior planning.
2. A heavy weapons company should be used for its supporting fires, not as a reconnaissance troop.
3. Adequate communications are a necessary part of any successful operation.
4. Lateral contact must be maintained.
5. A good defense takes advantage of the terrain in order to secure the best fields of fire and cover the natural avenues of approach.
6. All officers must use initiative.
7. The troops should be told the why as much as possible.